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Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel

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Introduction

Why should there be a critical, theoretical, even philosophical essay on Robert Smithson now, twenty years after his accidental death? Smithson (1938–1973) is acknowledged as a major figure of the American and global avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s; exhibitions of his work continue to be mounted and new publications discuss various aspects of his art. The year 1993, for example, saw a comprehensive European show of his work, accompanied by a lavish catalogue and translations of some of his writings into Spanish; in this same year the Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounted an exhibition devoted to Smithson and photography, with an important catalogue and essays. The artist would perhaps have been both gratified by and suspicious of this afterlife of his work. He was concerned to question the presuppositions and limits of museums, galleries, and other traditional frames for art by taking his work into the isolation of the Great Salt Lake or the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, yet he never imagined that these frames could be shattered altogether, developing

instead his concept of a dialectic between the site (the source of material or the place of a physical alteration of the land) and the nonsite (its parallel or representation in the gallery). Later exhibitions of his work, while fully informative *about* this aspect of his art, are not informed *by* it, as were the ones he organized himself; they continue to "take place" within the traditional structures that Smithson sought to unsettle. And the avalanche of critical writings about his work would appear to be an instance of that "printed matter" that he, like Borges in his "Library of Babel," found to be constitutive of the universe. Yet that writing and commentary, because of the very limits of its genre, cannot be adventurous in the way that Smithson's was, combining as it did theories of art, installations, or descriptions of his work (the *Spiral Jetty* or the *Mirror Displacements* in the Yucatan) with travelogue, fantasy, and his own photography (the present work will be no exception to this law of genre).

Despite the exhibitions and the commentaries, Smithson has still to be recognized, as he might be described in his own terms, as one of the *sites* where some of the most significant lines of twentieth-century art and thought intersect with one another. He is, we might say, a major fault line in the shifting of the ground under our feet that arises from the deflation of modernist visions of social and artistic progress, from the suspicion that the center is destined to be caught up in a constant circuit of displacements, from acknowledging that the history of art as we know it is but a minor blip in our dealings with the earth (so that the prehistoric has a growing resonance for the contemporary), and from the insight that language, too, has an ineluctable materiality that ought not to be idealized. In one of the plays on words in which he delighted, plays enabled by the givenness of language itself, Smithson described the artist as a "site-seer." This does not mean that the artistic personality is, as Plato said, a lover of mere sights and sounds, but that he or she is a visionary, a seer, whose vocation is to see beyond accustomed limits, although Smithson's seer

does not claim a totalizing vision that marks out new maps and boundaries. Since the art world does typically tend toward presenting its resources as a series of enjoyable sights and sounds, the force of the seer's work is often attenuated. Smithson was prepared to resist that sort of packaging because he managed to avoid many of the restraints to which the artist is usually subject. His early fascination with geology and prehistory provided a counterweight to the assumption that the trajectory and canon of Western art, as established in the textbooks and museums, was the very paradigm of history's process and meaning. As an autodidact, whose formal education stopped with high school, he escaped some of the modernist dogmas that the universities would have attempted to instill in him. As a voracious and eclectic reader, he absorbed writers like Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault, years before they began to have a noticeable impact on the American intellectual and artistic scene, and he developed his own critique of structuralism, which he called "destructuration," that both parallels and gives a distinctively American accent to what has come to be known as deconstruction; Jacques Derrida's *aperçu* that "America is deconstruction" is matched by Smithson's meditations on urban sprawl and the uncanniness of the movie theater, as well as by his works and theories.

To explore the site and the site-seer that bear Smithson's name, I have followed neither the path of biography nor of art history. There is no comprehensive biography of the artist yet, and this is appropriate; for any such attempt to tell the story of his life would have to be informed by a sense of the meaning of his work, with which we are still coming to terms. And the approaches that have been typical in the history of art, valuable as they are for matters of chronology, influence, and iconology, would have to confront Smithson's serious critique and interrogation of art history itself. Reviewing *The Writings of Robert Smithson* when they appeared in 1979, Craig Owens

wrote that "the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson's practice is, and remains a scandal."[1] Although Smithson is a major force in the writings of Owens and Rosalind Krauss, and although there have been important and illuminating essays on his work by other critics, there has been no attempt beyond the confines of the article or brief essay to articulate the theory in his work and the work that he does with theory. Owens might have written such a book if he had lived; the title of this one is meant in part to evoke both the name and the sense of "Earthwords," his review which I have just cited. It should also, of course, suggest the genre of earthworks, with which Smithson's name is so closely associated, and beyond that it should indicate a certain movement toward the earth, not exclusively in the sense of a biographical destiny, but as an approach, perhaps inevitably asymptotic, to the incalculable and ungovernable, to that place where, in Smithson's words, "the prehistoric meets the posthistoric." That this movement should be a downward one, an abandonment of the privileges of sculptural or architectural erection, a fall that has something to do with the legend (that which we must read) of that first great tower embodying the fantasy of permanence and of a transparent language, is the burden of this book's subtitle, and an index of Smithson's vision of history and entropy. Because of the scope of that vision, we ought to think of him not merely as an artist, but as one of the few American writers and thinkers of this quickly disappearing century who dealt in his own way with the issues of time, disorder, and tradition that also possessed figures such as Henry Adams, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams.